

Confessions from a Research Geek

By Lisa Gardner

Yes, ladies and gentleman, research is fun!

Confession time: I'm a geek. I love a good plot puzzle, a stubborn character, a new location I know absolutely nothing about. What better way to procrastinate from the sweat and tears business of writing than to conduct the Important Book Research? Besides, investigating new police procedures, psychological syndromes or geographic locations is like mining for gold—you never know what perfect nugget you'll unearth that makes all the difference in your novel. So let's start digging.

In research, there are three levels of exposure:

- Secondary sources: True crime novels, textbooks, Internet articles, etc.
- Primary sources: Interviewing doctors, lawyers, agents, cops, etc.
- Hands-on exposure: Gun classes, volunteering at a courtroom, etc.

Most people understand secondary sources well enough. Search some Internet sites, order some interesting homicide textbooks from Amazon.com, and get a few travel brochures from AAA. All are great starting points for understanding new subjects or places.

The real shebang, however, comes from the second and third levels of exposure—talking to real-life experts and/or immersing yourself in some real-life grit. That's when things get interesting! First off, let's approach contacting primary sources, actually getting our hands on a policeman, lawyer or Indian chief. ‘

Contrary to popular belief, you don't have to be published to get assistance. I have yet to contact any branch of law enforcement and have someone say, “Ooooh, Lisa Gardner, of course I'll help you!” Generally, the person answering the phone says, “Who are you? What do you want?” But never fear. Law enforcement agencies operate at the taxpayer's expense, and thus take taxpayer needs very seriously. More to the point, most experts love to talk about their jobs and if you're interested and professional they will be happy to assist you. “

Here are some rules of thumb for conducting expert interviews:

1. Family, friends, and/or websites can help you identify leading experts
2. Cold calling is also perfectly acceptable. Most of the experts I have contacted over the years aren't people I personally knew. When I needed information on FBI procedure for healthcare fraud, I simply called my local FBI field office and said I that I was a writer doing research on healthcare fraud. The public affairs officer kindly arranged for me to meet with two special agents.
3. Be professional. Rather than put someone on the spot, make an appointment to officially interview them, then call back. This gives you the opportunity to do as much preliminary research as you can. Also, if you need a lot of technical information, it doesn't hurt to fax your questions in advance so the person understands what you're looking for.
4. Don't be argumentative—you're not an investigative reporter, you are a fiction writer and these people are speaking to you out of professional courtesy. Be appreciative. Always thank the person for their time, both on the phone and with a written note.
5. Use one contact to help you find another contact. When I was researching *The Third Victim*, I called a DA in Portland, OR to learn about juvenile law statutes so I could properly charge the teenager in my novel. From her, I learned that charging a youth is not cut and dried—first, there is a whole process of evaluating the juvenile which involves a forensics psychologist and can take up to a year. Now I have a whole new subject to learn, juvenile evaluation. So I asked her if she could recommend a forensics psychologist. Then I call that man, and told him that so-and-so recommended him as an expert in his field. Now we had someone in common, and he was more receptive to my initial call. He went on to be a fabulously patient man, as I interviewed him many, many times before I fully grasped the juvenile evaluation process. People are nice!
6. Always leave the door open to call back. No matter how exhaustive and thorough you feel you are being, you will always end up with some sort of silly question when you go to write the novel. It never hurts to mention that you will probably have a few more questions—would they prefer for you to touch base by phone, e-mail, smoke signal? That way the person isn't surprised—or guarded—to hear from you again.
7. Finally, be pleasant and proud. You don't need to emphasize that you're not published or that you're not sure if this book will sell. People are interested in meeting a writer and you are a writer. Furthermore, you are a writer who is doing research, meaning you are a serious writer. Handle yourself accordingly and people will respond to that.

So now you've talked to some people in the field. Most of the time, that is probably good enough. But you may decide that you need more details for your novel. What about hands-on exposure? For example, if you're going to use lots of guns in your book, you could take a firearms course. Or you could enroll in a pottery course if your character throws clay, or a karate course if your character is a martial arts enthusiast. Hands-on exposure will bring you the maximum amount of detail, if you feel that you're up to it.

I took a firearms course for *The Perfect Husband*, which has several scenes involving the heroine trying to learn how to shoot a gun. This worked mostly because the heroine wasn't very comfortable with guns and neither was I. In all honesty, I still have issues getting all the gun info accurate in my novels, because I'm not that technically inclined and no amount of handling semiautomatics has helped me overcome my uneasiness with things that go BANG. Sometimes the author's limitations become the book's limitations. But if you're willing to push yourself, that will generally lead to a much more interesting novel.

One final note in the research department: Just because you've learned it, doesn't mean you get to use it. The primary goal of fiction is to entertain, and you must ask yourself is this research helping you portray a more riveting story, or is it simply demonstrating what a good student you've been? Personally, I have to throw it all in first—the good student in me. Then I hack eighty percent of it back out—the good writer in me. The story must come first.

But it's still a lot of fun to be a geek!